DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 433 940 PS 027 922

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TITLE Ethical Conflicts in Early Childhood Education.
PUB DATE 1999-09-00
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) (9th, Helsinki, Finland, September 1-4, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Conflict; Early Childhood Education; *Ethics; Foreign Countries; Moral Values; Parent Teacher Cooperation; Student Needs; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Behavior; Teaching (Occupation)
IDENTIFIERS Finland

ABSTRACT

This study investigated ethical conflicts in early childhood education as experienced by early education teachers. The study's focus was the themes and main interactive relationships involved in such conflicts. Twenty-six Finnish kindergarten and elementary teachers were asked to write about a real-life moral dilemma they had experienced in their work and to provide a just solution to it. Data were gathered during an inservice training on ethical issues in teaching. The written reports were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The different perspectives of teachers, colleagues, and parents were analyzed by the values and virtues presented in the stories. Findings showed that the majority of conflicts involved relationships between a teacher and parents. Other ethical dilemmas involved conflicts between a teacher and a colleague; and some dilemmas concerned conflicts between a teacher and the whole community (for example, in fighting for a child to remain in a classroom rather than be transferred to special education). Teachers referred frequently to the basic needs of children as the guiding value in solving the ethical conflicts in their work. The most frequently mentioned moral virtues of a teacher included bravery, truthfulness, and justice. (Contains 16 references.) (EV)

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ED 433 940

Ethical conflicts in early childhood education

A paper presented at the EECERA conference in Helsinki, Finland, September 1999.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate ethical conflicts in early childhood education as experienced by early education teachers. The teachers of the study (N=26) represented kindergarten and elementary school teachers from different public daycare centers and schools. Each teacher was asked to write about a real-life moral dilemma they had experienced in their work and to provide a just solution to it. The main interest of the study was to explore the themes and the main interactive relationships involved in the conflicts. Morality can be defined as an active process of constructing understandings and meanings relating to social interactions (McCadden 1998). According to this definition, there are no definite answer which morality or whose morality we should observe in our everyday interactions. In the context of school community, the values of teachers, parents and children are in a constant dialogue with each other. In addition to personal values, teachers need to consider the ethical standards of teaching profession. Professional ethics include reflection on the values and virtues of a teacher. In this paper, we present teachers' reflections on the everyday ethical dilemmas in their work. A special emphasis is shown to the most frequently mentioned virtues or values underlying teachers' ethics. The ethical conflicts experienced by early education teachers are analyzed and compared with earlier studies on ethical dilemmas in teaching (Colnerud 1997, Tirri 1999). The concrete examples of these conflicts are reported with the most successful and unsuccessful decisions to them.

2. Theoretical Framework

In the 1990s the moral base of teacher profession and the ethical dilemmas in teaching have been popular themes in educational research (Socket 1993, Oser 1994, Colnerud 1997, Tirri 1999). Everyday life of teachers involves relations to pupils, parents and colleagues. A school provides an institutional context for teachers' ethical dilemmas and interactive relationships. Previous research on ethical dilemmas in teaching indicates that teachers are not always aware of the moral impact of their actions (Jackson, Boostrom & Hansen 1993). Furthermore, teachers have reported to be ill-prepared for dealing with those ethical dilemmas they have identified in their work (Lyons 1990, Tirri 1999).

The Aristotelian perspective emphasizes particulars in teaching. In the Aristotelian view, decisions are not under some general principle and the character of the teacher always affects them (Bricker 1993). Applying Aristotelian view to teaching leads us to focus on the specifics of each case instead of some general principle. Teachers own descriptions and narratives of the case are at the heart of moral judgment (Sherman 1997, Fallona 1999).

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In early education children's needs for care and love are emphasized (Goldstein 1998). The feminist moral theory emphasizes ethics that enables maintainance of relationships and susteins connection (Gilligan 1982). According to Noddings, every interaction provides one with an opportunity to enter into a caring relation. In each caring encounter one can identify a one-caring and a cared-for. The one-caring steps out of one's own personal frame of reference and into the others (Noddings 1984, 24). Teachers who meet their pupils as ones-caring are taking a moral stance that has an effect on their professional ethics. This moral stance leads to a caring perspective on moral decision making. In the field of early childhood education, many authors find it impossible to tease apart education and care (Goldstein 1998).

Clark (1995) has identified fundamental needs of children to which teachers should aim at responding, such as to be loved or to be led. The best interest of a child can be identified as the leading goal of education. However, each individual teacher can pick out different morally salient features from an ethical conflict they experience. Teachers may interpret the needs of children in the different light than their colleagues or parents. These differences in teachers' perceptions might result to various moral judgements.

3. Methods

The data includes 26 written reports of ethical conflicts experienced by early education teachers. These teachers represented Finnish kindergarten and early elementary school teachers from urban public schools. The data was gathered during a in-service training on ethical issues in teaching. Each teacher was asked to write about a real-life moral dilemma they had experienced in their work and to provide a just solution to it. The request was formulated in the following way: *Describe a situation in your work in early education in which you have had difficulties to decide what would be the right thing to do from a ethical point of view.* In addition, the teachers were provided some detailed questions about the relationships, context and the solution of the dilemma.

The written reports of teachers were analyzed by qualitative content analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The data was coded according to the key concepts identified and the main categories were formed. The coding process focused on the main themes and relationships involved in the conflicts. The different perscpectives of teachers, colleagues and parents were analyzed by the values and virtues presented in the stories. The different perspectives in each conflict were presented in order to give justice to the complexity and relational knowing in ethical conflicts.

4. Results

4.1 Ethical conflicts between a teacher and parents

The ethical conflicts in early education were categorized according to the contacts and relations involved in the dilemma. Majority of the conflicts (N=10) dealt with relationships between **a teacher and parents.** Teachers reported situations in which they had to question whether the actions of the parents served the best interest of a child. These dilemmas dealt with the most suitable educational arrangement for the child or some evident problems at home. For example, in one of the cases the parents advocated the most academically advanced studies for a child who was identified as

mentally and emotionally disturbed by the teacher. According to the teacher this child had serious learning disorders and would not have profited from advanced studies. However, parents refused to see any disorders in their child regardless of expert opinions. In the cases that dealt with problems at home (for example, alcohol), the parents refused to discuss the needs of their child and the possible neglect their behavior can cause to the child.

The following quote from an essay demonstrates a conflict between a teacher and parents:

"I have a child in my kindergarten group who is retarded in many areas. This is a very difficult thing for the parents to admit. We have tried to discuss this issue with them with a medical doctor but these discussions have not changed their attitude. The child should start a school after a year and a half but I don't think he is mature for it. Every time I talk with his parents I feel I am torturing them with suggestions of speech therapy etc. However, I think I didn't have a choice here. I told the parents that their child needs professional help in order to be ready for the school. The parents were very angry to me and they told me they would transfer their child to another kindergarten. The co-operation with me was finished. I knew I did the right thing because I had the support from my supervisor and colleagues. I had to take the perspective of the child even it did not please his parents. I had to be honest with the parents. Now it is their choice what to do with their child. I could only make them suggestions to help the child to develop"

The teacher had taken a moral stance of care in this conflict. She had stepped out of her personal frame of reference and taken the perspective of a child involved. She knew that this stance would lead to a conflict with the parents but she didn't have a choice. According to her professional ethics as a kindergarten teacher, she gave priority to the children she was hired to care for. She had discussed this dilemma with her colleagues and her supervisor to hear the perspectives of other professional educators in her community. The teacher acknowledged her limits to act in this conflict. As a professional educator she could evaluate the situation and make some suggestions for the parents. It was the parents' responsibility to make the choice for their child. However, the teacher had the moral virtue of bravery by having the courage and the moral strength to do the right thing. She applied this virtue to teaching by making judgments in troubled circumstances about what is to be done and how to accomplish it.

4.2 Ethical conflicts between a teacher and a colleague

Another category of ethical dilemmas involved conflicts between **a teacher and a colleague.** These cases (N=8) involved situations in which a colleague had behaved in a cruel way towards a child. The cruel behavior had manifested itself in hurtful use of language or purposeful actions to humiliate the child in front of the others. Other conflicts with colleagues involved questions of power and hierarchy.

The following quote from an essay demonstrates a typical conflict between a teacher and a colleague:

"This is a conflict that doesn't seem to find a solution. My colleague uses psychological power to the children. She embarrasses them by asking intimate questions about their family problems, for example, about their parents' fights. She also manipulates and blackmails the children. I discussed this problem with her and after that discussion she started to criticize everything I am doing. She has for example made complaints about my work to my supervisor and spread gossips about my life to the parents. I told my supervisor my perspective of the story and she had a discussion with my colleague. We were supervised three times but the supervision did not solve our conflict. I had to transfer to another team in the same kindergarten. My colleague continues her cruel behavior with the children and the other teachers who work with her are afraid to confront her. They are worried they would lose their job. May be I should have asked for more help for the whole community to solve this problem. This problem is not solved, I only made it visible."

In this conflict the teacher takes the perspective of the children. She observes that her colleague is behaving in a cruel way toward children and she confronts her. She has the moral virtue of truthfulness by being straightforward with her colleague. She is applying this virtue to teaching by being honest, having integrity, and seeking the truth. However, her straightforwardness is not appreciated by her colleague. The colleague refuses to see her own vices and punishes the teacher by spreading lies about her to the supervisor and parents. The supervisor gets involved and provides supervision to these two teachers. The teacher finds this unsufficient and transfers to another team in order to get rid of her colleague. However, this doesn't solve the ethical conflict. The colleague continues her behavior and the other teachers working with her are not brave enough to confront her.

This case is very much in accord with earlier research on ethical dilemmas in teaching. According to earlier studies, conflicts involving colleagues are the most difficult ones to solve. Usually, they remain unsolved (Campbell 1996, Colnerud 1997, Tirri 1999). Colnerud identified conflicts between protecting pupils and the social norm of loyalty to colleagues as the most striking ethical conflict in teaching. In her study norms of collegial loyalty keeped teachers from defending the pupils against their colleagues (Colnerud 1997, 632-633).

4.3 Ethical conflicts between a teacher and the whole community

Some of the conflicts (N=8) concerned dilemmas between **a teacher and the whole community.** These dilemmas included cases in which the teacher had to stand against the whole school community in order to protect the rights of her pupil. These conflicts dealt with the educational arrangements of a pupil. The teacher wanted to keep the pupil in her own classroom and fought against his transfer to a special education class. In this case the teacher felt that she knew the child best and she needed to fight for his best interest in this case. Other issues dealt with the educational philosophy of the community that can be very different from the one advocated by a single teacher.

The following quote demonstrates a typical conflict between a teacher and the whole community:

" I started my new work in the kindergarten. They told me that their philosophy is to be as child-centered as possible. Very soon I noticed that this child-centered approach was lazier-faire approach to education. Many parents had noticed the same thing and some of them complained about it. My colleagues in this kindergarten called their approach as a constructive way of learning and accused me being a behaviorist. I started to pay attention to the eating habits of the children and I demanded some kind of behavior in lunch table. The children were confused because earlier they had been allowed to do whatever they want. The conflict I experienced in this situation was related to my own philosophy of education and the ultimate freedom given to the children in this kindergarten. I believe children need some guidelines and rules to learn to be citizens. My problem was weather I should adapt to their freedom or follow my own educational ideas. Many parents supported my ideas of making some rules to the children. Now the dilemma remains still unsolved. The children behave in a different way with different teachers. There are now guidelines that the whole community should follow. I find this situation very difficult. I am trying to start discussions with my colleagues. I think the main issue is who is responsible of the children? For me the answer is not to avoid that responsibility".

This case illustrated well a moral dilemma in a community that involves teachers, children and parents. The moral dilemma involves questions about the ethos of the kindergarten. There was a lack of discourse about the means and the ends of education. Teachers, parents and children had a different perspective on what is good for the children. The lack of time for reflection and the lack of moral discourse caused confusion and questions about responsibility. The teacher who identified this ethical dilemma showed moral virtue of justice by asking the fairness in the application of rules and norms. A just teacher is fair and treats her students equally. In the school community it is impossible to be a just teacher without any norms and rules. Open discussion is needed to establish some guidelines for organizational morality. In this moral discourse, the questions of children's needs and teachers' virtues should be addressed.

4.4 The values and virtues of teachers

Teachers referred frequently to the basic needs of children as the guiding value in solving the ethical conflicts in their work. The best interest of a child was the ideal underlying teachers' professional ethics. Most of the ethical conflicts invited the teachers to protect their pupils from harm. The harm included both psychological and physical treats to children caused by their parents or teachers' colleagues. The teachers referred frequently to some virtues that helped them in their moral decision-making. The most frequently mentioned moral virtues of a teacher included bravery, truthfulness and justice. Bravery was identified as the necessary virtue of a teacher in her attempt to do the right thing. Bravery was manifested in teachers' courage to confront parents or colleagues in the troubled circumstances. Teachers had to be truthful to their own ideals and ethics and seek the truth in the difficult conflicts. In the conflicts involving colleagues and parents the teacher had to be straightforward and identify vices in them. The value of truth gave teachers integrity to confront these kinds of negative issues. In the ethical conflict involving the whole community teachers valued the moral virtue of

justice. Equality and fairness in the application of rules and norms calls for moral discourse.

5. Concluding Remarks

This study adds new knowledge to the ethical conflicts in teaching by exploring the dilemmas experienced by early education teachers. The ethical dilemmas in early education were shown to be very content- and context-specific. However, all the dilemmas identified by teachers dealt with human relationships and their different ways of perceiving the best interest of a child. The main conflicts experienced were between a teacher and parents, a teacher and a colleague and a teacher and the whole community. The teachers identified children's needs to be safe, to be led and to be loved as the leading challenges in their work. In many cases, the teachers identified the Aristotelian virtue of bravery to be the teachers' virtuous response to children's needs. This virtue can be applied to teaching in ethical conflicts. Bravery can be manifested in teachers' courage and moral strength to take a stand for her pupil by making judgments in troubled circumstances about what is to be done and how to accomplish it.

The cases presented in this paper can be used in teacher education to prepare the teachers to face ethical conflicts in their teaching. The cases might help the teachers to reflect on their own virtues and vices. The successful and unsuccessful decisions presented in the paper can help the teachers to judge ethical conflicts from various perspectives.

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